

Think about the dramatic surprises that have influenced your lives. Like the assassinations of John Kennedy or Martin Luther King? And what about the cultural shifts that change the way we think, talk, and act. How can we be ready whether we know what is coming or not?

In 1941, America was caught unprepared by the surprise at Pearl Harbor. That surprise changed our world forever. But it was not the last time our country was caught napping? How about “9-11” when terrorists slammed airliners into the World Trade Center and the Pentagon?

The Gospel came into our world as a different kind of surprise. Advent means to come into and announces God’s plan for Jesus to come into our world. Today we move deeper into Advent, as preparation, so we are not caught by surprise.

When I was growing up, Walter Cronkite hosted a weekly TV show called, “you were there.” Through recreation and film clips the show carried people into the past to remember, as if it was happening all over again. As we again prepare for Christmas, and then Holy Week and Easter, listen to the words of scripture as if “*you were there!*” That will help set the scene for the surprising entrance of grace into a world where some were prepared, and some were not. Just like happens each and every day all around us.

Advent is a reset that allows us to move back to the beginning, as if we had never heard about Christmas before. To suspend our concerns for what have been bothering us or we are afraid of in the future and prepare instead to walk into Christmas morning as you never have before.

Even though we know the Christmas story by heart, if we listen this year, as if “we were there” we might be even more moved by the surprise of a baby in a manger. December 7<sup>th</sup> is a date on the calendar, just as September 11<sup>th</sup> is. Both remember the consequences of NOT preparing and missing all the signs that, in hindsight, would have been seen and prepared for.

When a country is attacked, the lack of preparations are devastating, result in many deaths, and initiate a response called war that possibly never needed to happen. It is so terrible when there could have been actions taken to avoid the war or better prepare so that event itself might have been easier to contain.

In our recent past, the same thing happened when mortgages were being given to people who had no understanding of the true cost and no ability to pay. When the inevitable foreclosures began and the money dried up, not only did people lose their homes, and many banks were forced to close, but an entire economy went into a

terrible recession. And it never needed to be!

Advent is a season that prepares us for a lifetime of faith. It calls us prepare for the reality of attacks we can anticipate, and those which cannot be seen coming that bring pain and suffering and death into our lives. Life is like “9/11” over and over again. But God has prepared for us what could catch us by surprise and helps us for what we could do nothing about on our own.

Advent helps us appreciate how God’s preparations change our past, present, and future. As we take time to prepare in the right way, we can embrace the gift of the Christ child as a *solution rather than just a symbol*. Christmas is not just a season of parties and massive spending, but a celebration of the undeserved love for unprepared people that God has brought into our world.

Think about how preparations for hurricanes have changed, as we remember past storms, look at present patterns, understand what we need to do to get ready and how to deal with the aftermath of such devastation. So it is with faith. As we prepare focus on the real gift of a baby in a manger (who lovingly embraced a cross and escaped the tomb our preparations change.) Rather than Christmas “just” being a holiday, the reality that it is a “holy day” begins a lifestyle of personal defense, celebration, and mission.

John Baptist was the ultimate early warning system. He did what prophets do, which is to announce to the world, God’s intent and purpose. Through prophetic actions of first going into the wilderness and then washing that old life away in the river, he helped people to embrace an object lesson that would show them what would happen in their spiritual lives through repentance and the refreshing gift of life that Messiah would bring.

Please do not miss the point or the practical reality of John. He invited people into the wilderness to leave all their daily distractions so they might better listen to God’s message than that of the world. He called them to reflect, to look at life and faith in a new way and prepare for their priorities to change. His call was simple, “People get ready!” And that is the Advent tune today!

Advent is our call to gather and stand in a place set apart from the noise and distractions and failures of daily living. So that we might be ready to really see Jesus for who He is and celebrate for what he allows us to become. The story of John baptizing in the Jordan is not a proof text for baptism but an announcement to “get ready!”

Consider your life choices and the directions your preparations have dragged you into. What is the point of traffic jams, hours spent on the internet, credit spending sprees, and frantic buying? How helpful are our daily routines if there is a lack of prayer and quiet reflection on what the day of Christ’ birth really means? Advent our time to retreat to the desert and move away from daily busy-ness and noise. It is a quiet place to listen/observe/prepare) – so that we don’t face “day of infamy” but rather a lifetime of

joy!

I don't have to tell you that life isn't always full of bright lights, happy faces, the perfect gift, and everyone singing the same song. There is much we can't control and much that brings fear and pain into our lives. Advent offers a practical way to remember, review, and renew. In the quiet of this season, and the simple preparations we have opportunity to undertake, something special can happen!

As we step back into quiet of remembrance and prayer, like going on a retreat, even if only for a brief moment each day, the gift of the Christ Child becomes more dazzling, more powerful, and more practical!

*There is no need to ever get caught by surprise again, and even if we do, the gift of a baby in a manger proclaims God's powerful love will be even stronger.*

There is no simpler way to say it: There is still time to prepare!

-- Seeber